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SUBJECT: PARLIAMENT COMMITTEE APPROVES "LANDMARK WOMEN'S RIGHTS BILL" INTRODUCED BY ISLAMISTS

REF: A. 06 KUWAIT 4579
[B.](#) 06 KUWAIT 3984

Sensitive But Unclassified; not for Internet distribution.

¶1. (U) On February 4, Parliament's Women's Affairs Committee approved a bill, introduced by Islamist MPs (reflets), that would give Kuwaiti women a host of new benefits, including the right to apply for government housing, longer paid maternity and mourning leave, unemployment allowances for stay at home mothers, and partial salaries for wives accompanying their husbands on study or diplomatic assignment abroad. Many of these benefits are already provided to Kuwaiti men. The committee's decision received front-page coverage in both English-language dailies on February 5. The Kuwait Times ran the story under the headline: "National Assembly panel approves landmark women's rights bill." According to the article, the legislation is "in line with Islamic Sharia law." The bill must still be passed by Parliament and approved by the Government before it takes affect. The Chairman of the Women's Affairs Committee, Salah Ashour, said he expected Parliament to vote on the bill in March or April.

¶2. (SBU) Salah Ashour told PolOff on February 5 that he was also planning to hold a major conference in late March or early April on issues facing Kuwaiti women. The conference will bring together prominent female researchers as well as government officials and will focus on unequal access to social security benefits and housing, unequal treatment of women in personal status law, and how to encourage women to get more involved in politics. He said major changes are needed in all of these areas, but placed special emphasis on amending Kuwaiti law so that a Kuwaiti woman can pass citizenship on to her children (currently only children of Kuwaiti men get citizenship) and so that a Kuwaiti woman and her non-Kuwaiti husband and children can be considered a Kuwaiti family (currently a family is defined as a Kuwaiti man with a wife and children, thus depriving the children of Kuwaiti women of many of the government benefits afforded to Kuwaiti families). He predicted that there would be opposition to such changes behind closed doors, but that few MPs would take the political risk of voting against it in an open vote in the parliament.

¶3. (SBU) Ashour stressed the importance of increasing women's political involvement, and noted that aside from a small group of activists most women either oppose women's political rights or see politics as a way to solve their personal bureaucratic problems rather than as a way to address larger issues facing Kuwaiti women. He expressed his opposition to the idea floated by some women activists of having a female quota in parliament, since it would violate the constitution. He prefers a system of voting "lists."

Each list would include at least one woman, thereby facilitating women reaching the parliament. The details of this system, such as whether candidates would have to run as part of lists and whether voters would have to vote for lists rather than individual candidates, are not clear.

¶4. (SBU) Comment: This is a clear example of the impact of women's suffrage on politics in Kuwait. Although none of the 27 female candidates in last year's elections were elected, male parliamentarians are now competing to promote the interests of their female constituents, who now make up the majority of the electorate. As is often the case with Kuwait's Parliament, those efforts are still focused primarily on obtaining more government benefits, not on implementing the broader political and economic reforms many here argue are crucial for development. End comment.

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